

The EU's unwillingness to discuss the possibility of a 'Brexit' is playing into the hands of Eurosceptics



*British Prime Minister David Cameron has made a commitment to hold a referendum on the UK's EU membership, should his party win the next general election. **Tim Oliver** writes that while the possibility of a 'Brexit' has been much discussed in the UK context, across the rest of the EU the issue has largely been downplayed or avoided. He argues that if EU leaders continue to remain silent on the topic it may add momentum to the arguments of British Eurosceptics.*

In Britain the idea of quitting the European Union provokes lively debate about its desirability, likelihood and what it could mean. But as I recently discovered while researching the **potential impact of a UK exit on the EU**, debate elsewhere in the EU is limited. Yet it would be a significant moment for the EU if a country of 63 million Europeans voted to leave. So why, when the possibility has become more real than ever before, has debate elsewhere been so limited?

First, discussing the idea of a withdrawal from the EU has long been a taboo. Under international law there is nothing to prevent a member state exercising the right to leave, exactly what the UK would have done had it voted to leave in its 1975 referendum. Yet it was not until the advent of the European Constitution in 2004 that the right was clearly stated. Even then the idea faced opposition. Amendments were tabled to remove the article outlining a process of withdrawal, now known as **Article 50 TEU**.

As the Dutch Government made clear in justifying an **amendment** to delete the article: 'facilitating the possibility to withdraw from the Union is contrary to the idea of European integration as set out in the preamble of the TEU: "Resolved to continue the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe".' The idea Britain might break with this, or as David Cameron has **suggested**, seek to stay in the EU but drop the commitment to 'ever closer union,' questions the EU's founding ideas. No wonder it provokes an uncomfortable silence from elsewhere.



David Cameron and Herman Van Rompuy, Credit: G8 UK (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Feeding this taboo is a concern that triggering Article 50 would open a Pandora's Box the rest of the EU might prefer was kept firmly shut and best not thought about. Questions overhang how the process set out in Article 50 is to be enacted. What negotiating red lines should the EU set down? What type of post-withdrawal relationship should be offered to the UK?

Then there is the prospect of shifts in the balance of power within the EU brought about from reorganising its institutions, budgets and policies to make up for the absence of the British. Would small states gain over large states? Would north and west lose out to south and east? Would Europe become less open and more protectionist, and what hopes would there be for EU foreign and security cooperation? What would happen to relations with other non-EU European states,

NATO, and the United States? Might other member states be tempted to threaten withdrawal to get their way or, alternatively, could the EU become more willing to threaten the expulsion of a difficult member state? Could the withdrawal be blamed on British Euroscepticism, or would it reflect and connect with growing Euroscepticism elsewhere? Could the withdrawal unleash centrifugal forces that begin the unravelling of the EU, or could the EU, rid of an awkward member, find it easier to move towards 'ever closer union'?

The rest of the EU could also be forgiven for thinking we've been here before. The current debate has strong echoes of the successful, if ultimately insignificant, renegotiation followed by an in-out referendum in 1975. Then there's the never ending series of complaints and snipes the EU has been subjected to in the UK political debate. Again, the rest of the EU could be forgiven for thinking this is just another example of the British threatening to throw their toys out of the pram. Even in Britain few are certain whether the British will ever follow through on the commitment to hold an EU referendum, everything hanging on developments between now and a general election due by 2015. So why should the rest of the EU pre-empt such a move by confronting the issue? It might appear better to wait it out and call Britain's bluff by remaining silent.

Ignoring British demands, or refusing to take them seriously, certainly appeals to those who see the approach adopted by David Cameron in his January 2013 speech as nothing short of trying to **blackmail** the rest of the EU. Cameron's demand for a renegotiated relationship or Britain will likely vote to leave, rests on the idea the EU can't say no because letting Britain go would damage the EU. The potential disruption and damage to the EU is not something to be overlooked, but from the perspective of the rest of the EU it is the **UK who would suffer the far bigger consequences**. It's as if Britain is threatening to shoot the EU in the foot while aiming the gun at its own head. A refusal to discuss a Brexit therefore stems in part from a view of Cameron's strategy as self-defeating, illogical and just plain bonkers.

More than anything the rest of the EU has largely ignored the issue because of the far greater damage the collapse of the euro could bring. This is especially so for Germany, the country that more than any other will make the final call on negotiations with the UK. But this week's **federal election** means Germany is not interested right now. If anything, for members of the Eurozone Britain's attempts to try and separate itself have provoked only **feelings of anger** at what they see as Britain's latest show of non-solidarity. Not only has the crisis in the Eurozone therefore left little room to debate the British question, it has if anything **provoked some feelings** that losing the UK might be necessary collateral damage for saving the euro. What this collateral damage would be, however, is unclear.

How long then can the rest of the EU avoid discussing the issue of a Brexit? There remains a chance a referendum **could be triggered sooner than many think**. More likely the EU would have to face the issue after 2015. If a newly elected British government pursued a renegotiation and referendum, then it will be difficult for the EU to ignore the possibility of discussing a withdrawal. The British public and the rest of the EU will need to know what will happen should the British say no to any renegotiated relationship and opt to leave.

If anything, the rest of the EU's silence could add to the momentum for Britain to leave by playing into the hands of Eurosceptics – who would then be left to argue either that the rest of the EU doesn't care about the UK, or doesn't want to admit how much it needs it. Here the EU needs to realise that if it were to remain silent and do little to keep Britain in, then a Brexit could end up looking like a passive expulsion. Just as confrontation with an unwanted guest at a party can be avoided by making them feel so uncomfortable and isolated that they leave, so too might it be easier to make things suitably uncomfortable that Britain leaves of its own accord. But it still leaves the unanswered question of what type of party the rest of the EU will then be left with.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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